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# Chuan Leekpai [Thailand, Prime Minister]

Leekpai Chuan

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Interviewee: **CHUAN LEEKPAI**

Interviewer: Punchada Sirivunnabood

Date: 17 February 2015

Location: Bangkok, Thailand

00:00:20

Punchada

I would like to greet His Excellency, Mr. Chuan Leekpai, who has kindly agreed to the interview today.

00:00:29

Chuan

My pleasure.

00:00:30

Punchada

First of all, I would like you to tell us about your life before you became a politician. What were you doing at that time, and what motivated you to enter Thailand's political arena?

00:00:48

Chuan

I had studied law. So, I was working as a lawyer before standing as a candidate for Member of Parliament (MP) nomination. I was doing that until the 1968 Constitution came into effect. Then I returned to my hometown in Trang Province and ran for an MP seat. Luckily, I reached the age requirement just in time.

00:01:08

Punchada

Your record shows you've headed many ministries since you became a politician. Which ministry do you think allowed you to achieve your most successful performance, which has also contributed to national development?

00:01:25

Chuan

Every ministry I've served, really. It's just that I had a different timeframe for each ministry. At the Ministry of Justice, for example, I started off as Deputy Justice Minister. I was then serving as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office. Under General Prem Tinsulanonda's premiership, the Ministry of Commerce, then headed by Mom Rajawongse Seni Pramoj, was caught up in a corruption scandal. Later, I was transferred to the Commerce Ministry to replace him. Then I became Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister, followed by Education Minister. I

headed the Education Ministry for three years and did a lot of work, covering, for instance, legal amendments that have since allowed teacher-training colleges to teach more subjects. Its effect is still present today. Besides, I also introduced various policies and worked to increase educational opportunities in Thailand.

After that, I became Speaker of the House of Representatives, then Health Minister following a general election. As Health Minister, despite a limited budget, I laid the foundation of free healthcare for children and senior citizens. I later became Deputy Prime Minister before heading the Agriculture and Cooperatives Ministry once again. My transfers to various offices were determined by different crises I was tasked to solve. In 1992, I was elected Prime Minister.

00:03:09

[Punchada](#)

Let's go back to the time when you first became a prime minister. Which area of your work has led to a change in Thailand? Was it a challenge for you? And how successful was it?

00:03:28

[Chuan](#)

My premiership followed a crisis of democracy in 1991-1992. So, at that time, the most popular question among journalists was: Will there be a coup? My duty was to protect democracy and make it sustainable, while returning the army to its rightful place and preventing them from staging a coup. It was successful. The then government didn't create conditions that might have given the army a reason to intervene. There was no corruption, for example, and the government did not intervene in the army's work unnecessarily. I mean if whatever they were doing did not go against their regulations and system, we let them do it. When there was a need for the government to intervene, we did it with reasons. I told the army directly that I was a politician. So I would come and go, while the army would always remain. What I wanted to do then was to ensure the army stayed where it was supposed to, and followed its regulations, as well as discipline. I didn't want the army to be used by any politician to rig any election, which was a problem then. My government would not use the army for such a purpose; I can guarantee that. I always made that clear. So, during my premiership, there was no problem with the army, despite the journalists' concerns. To answer your question, we nearly completed all of our policies, which included spreading incomes, providing opportunities and decentralising the administrative powers to other parts of the country. We did that and the impact can still be seen today. Personally, human resource development is central to Thailand's development. So education was one of our main policies. Many Thai children got to drink milk when I first became Prime Minister. When we first adopted the milk policy, people said: Drink Chuan's milk. Children studying in kindergarten and students in Grade 1-4 got to drink milk every day. This was important, in my opinion, although many people told me the policy wouldn't benefit me politically because those children couldn't vote. So I said to

them: those children would grow to be very important for Thailand in the future and their physique, as well as brain must be good and better than ours. The Budget Bureau then gave us some money to provide those children with milk for free, resulting in a considerable change to the country's human resource development.

Afterwards, I asked for a Cabinet resolution to increase the number of universities in 11 provinces. Some educational institutes had already had some foundation laid. I then asked for a Cabinet resolution to turn them into campuses, because to establish a new university required a lot of money. We were not ready financially at that time. So, the only option available was to turn those institutes in 11 provinces across Thailand into campuses. So far, one of them has become a university, that is the Payao University. The rest are still campuses but they are well founded, spreading across the Northeast, North and South.

Despite these educational institutes in various locations, poor people still couldn't afford education. That made me think of establishing the Student Loans Fund, which has been operating for 20 years now, since 1995. Some 2-3 million students have so far benefited from the Fund.

00:07:34

[Punchada](#)

When you became Prime Minister for the second time, that was after a crisis. Your government must have experienced quite a few challenges. What were your policies then, and how did you solve the problems Thailand was facing?

00:07:50

[Chuan](#)

After I dissolved the House, an election took place and the Democrat Party lost. The Chart Thai Party won and Banharn became Prime Minister. He was in power for almost a year before leaving office. Then, Thailand had another general election and I was hoping so much that I would become Prime Minister again. I said that if I got elected, I would continue working for the country, but if I lost, I would let the winning party set up a new government. In the end, I lost by two votes. I kept my promise and did not set up a new government even though I could have done so, given that I had more support. By keeping my promise, I became the leader of the Opposition. General Chavalit then became Prime Minister, but in less than a year, Thailand encountered the **Tom Yum Koong crisis**. The government resigned and the then MPs gave their support to the runner-up. That's how I became Prime Minister for the second time and remained so for around three years. During my premiership, I had a chance to continue working on my old policies. Fortunately, our team was like a dream team with efficient members. Before I became Prime Minister, Thailand was compared to a critically ill patient. My government successfully saved that patient's life and helped him recover gradually. I believe the Thai economy has become as strong as it is today partly because of the strong economic foundation laid by my government at that time.

Other major problems faced by my government included reduced state incomes. We also had to carry out some purchases, continue the burdens left behind by the previous government, and cancel certain expenses. One of these expenses was the purchase of F-18A fighter aircraft, worth several tens of billions of Baht. The United States had already begun the assembly by then. Upon the invitation of President Clinton, I travelled to the US to discuss the issue with his government. I asked to cancel the contract, which was approved on condition that the case be the first and last one of its kind. So the contract was cancelled, and the US government bought the F-18A fighters since they had already been assembled. I also asked not to be fined as well. I discussed the issue of the F-18A fighters with the US Defense Secretary. I asked him to return Thailand the deposit it had paid. The Secretary agreed to discuss my request with his government and eventually, they returned me the deposit in the form of arms. This is one of the problems that not so many people know about...

00:10:53

[Punchada](#)

That's true.

00:10:54

[Chuan](#)

...that we worked with difficulty, but the result was worth it. During the crisis, the US helped Thailand. Its government told the universities in America to reduce the tuition fee for Thai students to the same rate paid by its citizens, and also to allow them to work. The Baht then depreciated a lot, from 25 Baht up to nearly 50 Baht to the US dollar - a huge burden for many parents.

The crisis also took me to a discussion table in Switzerland, where I said Thailand did not blame any party and that what had happened was a result of our country's weakness, which needed solving, to restore our strength and to prevent the crisis from occurring again. To solve the crisis, we needed to work with honesty and rationality within the rule of law.

And I think this principle has allowed us to work smoothly. It is also part of good governance. However, not so many people know that good governance was one of the Cabinet resolutions that I signed in 1999, urging both the public and private sectors to exercise good governance in their organisations so as to prevent the crisis from happening again. Good governance goes hand in hand with what I always believe in, which is the rule of law. Throughout my time running the country, I have always said that my government wouldn't be able to make everyone equal in wealth, but in respect of the rule of law. The rule of law is a key principle I always follow and it forms one of the practices of good governance. The rule of law is very important for democracy in Thailand. Whenever the country is run against the rule of law, there will be a crisis. So, I always respect the rule of law while working.

00:13:17

Punchada

Your image is well admired by the Thai people. Your transparency has won you respect from many Thais. However, sometimes, some members of your Cabinet were involved in corruption. How did you deal with this problem?

00:13:41

Chuan

When I was Prime Minister, some ministers were suspicious of the public. I told my subordinates personally and directly not to be involved in any corruption as I wouldn't be able to protect them. I said no matter who it would be, politicians or civil servants, I wouldn't be able to protect any corrupt person. I said, however, if they worked with honesty, I would protect them. When a Cabinet resolution was required, nothing corrupt would be approved, even though some members might have considered getting involved in corruption. One time, for example, I had known a certain minister owned a personal construction business and wanted to secure a deal. He was upset that he couldn't take part in the bidding. So we interrogated him from morning until evening. There might have been concerns over corruption and criticisms, but I believed nobody in my administration dared go against the regulations.

00:14:38

Punchada

I'd like to ask you about politics in present-day Thailand, which has been divided into two sides. You mentioned earlier that while you were Prime Minister, you tried to create equality and drafted your policies accordingly. At present, the structure of our country and its politics is different. What do you think has caused such change and do you think it's possible for Thailand to be the same as it was during your premiership again?

00:15:10

Chuan

People are saying the conflicts at present are a result of a big social gap between the rich and the poor, which I don't always agree with. Every society, more or less, has an inequality problem. The society, however, should ensure the poor enjoy the same right to justice as the rich do. If the rich break the law, they must be sentenced; the same applies to the poor. I often say I want everyone to be under the same rule of law, equally. So, if the National Anti-Corruption Commission or the Election Commission found any of my Cabinet members suspicious, for example, when they declared their assets incorrectly, my government's duty was to respect the rule of law, not to help the wrongdoer or to make the matter worse. When any minister was criticised and probed, I would tell the civil servant to speak the truth. For example, there was a probe into one of the ministers who had been accused of association with drugs. He was worried

about what he should do, so I told him: say the truth and don't blame anyone or lie, even though what you did was wrong. I have always been this way because I think this ethical value I always uphold is very important for any democratic nation.

Actually, when I was working then, Thailand had a coalition government. So it wasn't easy to get everyone to follow the same practice. Still, my straightforward, non-selective and fair approach led to cooperation. Those with ill intentions dare not do what they wanted to, as they knew I wouldn't let it happen. For instance, when a political party broke our agreement, I told the party to leave the coalition immediately. I told them directly they had to go because they didn't respect the regulations. People know I take promises seriously. In a democratic system, I think this quality is one of the most important qualities every politician should have, given that they have to serve the public. We are selected by the public. When we work, our work must be in their best interest.

00:17:46

[Punchada](#)

Given that you've spent a long time in Thai politics, you must have seen the development of political parties and the politics itself. What do you think is the main factor that has changed Thai politics dramatically, and has such a factor contributed to the social inequality, as in the gap between the rich and the poor?

Thailand has seen a change from military governments, following coups. Later, however, I believe the army developed a maturity of judgment. They could see that the direction Thailand was then heading would not benefit the nation. So the idea of staging a coup was no more.

After that period though, the army grew more mature and it knew the country should be ruled democratically. There was no reason to seize power anymore. So, why did we have a coup recently? I'd like to answer that Thai politics has taken a bad turn. People least expected to witness any seizure of power. They felt Thailand's democracy had matured and would continue in that way. However, a political business came into play 15 years ago, when money was used to buy everything, including votes and politicians. A political businessperson can set up a party without doing everything from scratch because it's possible to buy and combine different parties before turning them into a party right away. It's like you buy different shops and combine them together to make a big store without spending time building connections with customers. This is a significant change that has happened to Thai politics.

So when a political business is at play, everything becomes a business. Politicians turn into businessmen. Can you give me any benefits? If you do, you'll become a director-general or a permanent secretary, for example. When politics becomes a business, organisations in the country go corrupt. NGOs are compromised, almost all the media bought. We can almost say that no system can operate in a truly democratic fashion. That's why we have a political crisis and Thai politics has taken a bad turn into the situation as we see today. Those elected didn't get



elected fairly, but through vote buying. When they take office, they don't follow the democratic but extra-judicial way of practice.

We can see this problem by looking at the situation in southern Thailand. Our King was trying to solve the separatism problem for 40 years. The South experienced a period of relative peace. But one day, someone just changed the way of handling the South and turned it into an extra-judicial practice by shooting and killing people.

00:20:17

Punchada

You're more or less the symbol of the South in the party. When you're no longer part of the party, do you think the South will continue to be the Democrat Party's stronghold?

00:20:28

Chuan

I think it will. I'm part of the reason why the Democrat Party has a lot of support from the South, given that I served as a southern MP for a long time, which then allowed people to see my performance. So there is a bond between the southerners and myself.

00:20:46

Chuan

There are many problems in the South that need solving, as much as those in other regions. The MPs should observe and follow up on these problems; otherwise they wouldn't know the real situation. Some high-ranking civil servants don't know about the situation on the ground. They don't know that the roads are in poor condition because they have never travelled there by car. They usually travel by plane. You can't really see it by listening to someone's explanation, but if you travel by car from Bangkok to southern Thailand, you'll know what the roads are like.

Also, there are other problems such as the price of rubber, which has gone down. So we need to take care of people affected by the price drop, giving them some guidance on how they should adapt their lifestyle and telling them not to ask for help from the government all the time. Sometimes we need to tell them that certain problems can't be solved by any government, while others can. We shouldn't give them hope in an unrealistic way. Even though I'm no longer an MP, I continue to work for people. I still visit them, give them advice, and ask civil servants to bring them food and vegetables that they can grow and sell in a short period of time. Don't let them wait for the rubber price to bounce back. We don't know for sure if the price will go up again as the situation doesn't change according to internal factors alone. So, we can't just leave them to wait. This kind of problem is one that requires you to step away from the legislative sphere in order to know the real situation. They're MPs and this is their duty.



00:22:08

Punchada

I'd like to ask a final question. Thailand is facing many political problems. In your opinion, what kind of leader can lead Thailand towards unity and a healthy democracy?

00:22:24

Chuan

As a person who supports democracy and got elected, the leader has to be an elected politician, and nobody else. I believe a healthy system of political parties can screen good politicians. Politicians who come from true political parties won't be able to come to power by using money. Their political party will evaluate their qualities using conditions such as honesty, competence, and the ability to govern.

I'll use the Democrat Party as an example. I spent 22 years proving that I could be a party leader, not just a few days; that would be impossible for any party that is truly a political party. However, if a party is a business in disguise, anyone can become its leader. Whoever has money can become that party's leader and support the party, as well as its members, financially. This kind of party isn't truly a political party. So, I think the person who will become a national leader must come from a political party that is truly one, which selects its best member to lead the nation. Every party wants to select their best member because they have to compete with other parties. However, each has their own way of thinking and making decisions. Therefore, we can't rely on someone's personal qualities alone; the country must have good governance. When there is a problem that is beyond the scope of any existing policies, for instance, the leader must be able to make a decision that best benefits the country, as well as the public.

During my premiership, I decided to send soldiers to East Timor, and I think that's one of the most crucial decisions ever made for the country, not for myself, or the Democrat Party. The then UN Secretary-General called me to ask for help. However, I didn't make that decision based on his request alone, but other reasons. I decided then that Thailand should play a role in helping the international community. Basically, Thailand should help the world, besides helping itself. Our action must also be welcomed. It must not backfire on us. These were the points I had to consider upon hearing the request from the UN Secretary-General. In the end, despite objection of some military groups and the then opposition, I decided to send soldiers to East Timor. Personally, I think this is a key action that has made the international community see Thailand as one of the countries that helped the world solve a problem and restore peace. At that time, I thought about this issue very carefully. After making that decision, I thought about Indonesia and whether or not the country would agree with my decision. I then met with President Habibie to seek his approval. He agreed with my decision. He asked me, however, not to include Australia in the deployment, as they were caught in a big conflict at that time. After securing his approval, I

then thought about whether Thailand would financially be able to afford to send troops. In the end, however, we didn't have to pay anything. The UN took care of the expenses. At the beginning, actually, the UN didn't pay for us; Japan did. So, after the affordability issue, I then thought of our soldiers: will they risk losing their lives? After a careful consideration, I assessed that the risk was very low. Therefore, I decided to send Thai soldiers to East Timor. This is a key event that made the international community accept Thailand. I still remember the time when various state leaders were granted an audience with the king, the first thing they did was praise Thailand for its contribution to the UN Mission of Support in East Timor. That was also the first time that a Thai soldier was appointed to the overseas post of Force Commander of the UN Mission of Support in East Timor. This had never happened before and may not happen again in the future. So that is one of the many decisions made.

Some other decisions had to depend on what our neighbouring countries thought. Singapore and the Philippines were caught in a conflict related to a domestic helper. A Filipino maid working in Singapore was mistreated by her employer and that resulted in a conflict between the two nations. To resolve the conflict, there needed to be a mediator. I'm proud that both countries trust Thailand. At that time, former Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and President Ramos of the Philippines trusted Thailand. I then asked Deputy Minister Dr. Surin (Pitsuwan) to mediate between the two nations. Dr. Surin had to fly to both countries often but this wasn't picked up by the media. In the end, the two countries reconciled.

There is another incident I want to talk about. Singapore decided there should be a meeting between Asia and Europe, later known as ASEM. When the idea was first conceived, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong discussed it with me first to see if I would agree. If I agreed, he would continue working on it. If I didn't, he would stop there. I felt very honoured. In the end, I said I agreed. As a result, the then Prime Minister of Singapore became the coordinator and selected Thailand as the first host of ASEM.

These significant decisions were made without any forward planning. It required a good understanding, knowledge of history, and forward thinking. As I mentioned previously, any government would face unexpected problems and long-term problems. The unexpected problems usually make news. We can't allow these unexpected problems to hinder our work in the long run. During my premiership, I managed to maintain good relations between neighbouring countries. We were able to ease regional tensions and promote coordination by dealing with the matters in a straightforward manner, and by paying attention to our neighbouring countries.

00:29:17

[Punchada](#)

Thank you very much Mr Chuan for giving the programme the honour of interviewing you. Thank you very much.

00:29:20

Chuan

Thank you.